

Queering the archive

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When I began collecting the oral histories for my book, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History*, a performance was the last thing on my mind. I was more interested in creating a written archive of life stories heretofore undocumented. It was not until after a year into the research and after meeting so many great storytellers that I realized that a performance was in order. For the page could not capture the vocal cadence, verbal ticks, non-verbal cues, and *intimacy* created through oral history performance. Initially, I considered adapting a script from the oral histories and casting a show of eight to twelve actors. After more thought, however, I decided not to stage a production with multiple cast members and instead make the show a solo piece with me performing excerpts from various narratives. I also made this decision because I saw it as an opportunity to use performance to ask larger questions about how to stage ethnographic fieldwork. For instance, how does moving the narratives from the printed page and the mostly private space of a reader to the stage with a public audience alter their meaning? What does the dramatization of the researcher's relationship to the subjects and to the audience reveal that the book version only implies? What are the ethics of performing these narratives in the absence of the narrators? These were somewhat different questions I pursued when analyzing a poem or piece of fiction. The stakes were different because the narratives are those of living people and, as Dwight Conquergood so aptly noted, "opening and interpreting lives and is not the same as opening and closing books." And yet, the attention to details of a text that literary analysis requires is a skill that is actually grounded in ethics—an ethics of care that propels one to "pay attention" to what the text is telling you. And it was this sense of detail that propelled me to think about performing the narratives of *Sweet Tea* in such a way that their complexity was communicated and my role as co-performative witness would be highlighted.

From thinking through this process came "Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell Their Tales," a traditional Reader's Theater rendering of the narratives, which I began to tour to colleges and universities around the country in 2006—even before *Sweet Tea* was published. In "Pouring Tea" I sit on the stage on a stool with a music stand and the script of the show and privilege the "voice" of the narrator—voice not just in the aesthetic sense, but also in the political sense. Since many of the men have never had a platform to speak, it was important

to me to focus the audience's attention on the story each man tells as a *political* act. Unlike a narrator in fiction, the stakes of these men telling their stories were high in the context of a conservative and sometimes hostile environment in the South. The conventions of Reader's Theater lend themselves well to a focus on narrative, but do not necessarily accommodate the self-reflexivity so common in performance ethnography. In other words, I also felt compelled to implicate myself in the storytelling event so as not to obfuscate the role I played as researcher in the moment of oral history performance. My challenge in "Pouring Tea," then, was to find a way to draw on performance conventions—e.g., adaptation, narrative theory, point of view, etc.—while also highlighting the ethical and political standards of performance ethnography. In other words, my challenge was to queer the notion of the archive through performance—or, to borrow from Diana Taylor, I wished to dismantle the archive/repertoire binary by focusing on my body as the site of both.

In the performance, I introduce each narrative with an audio clip from the original oral history interview that sometimes includes my asking questions. Preceding the clip is music that corresponds to the theme of the narrative I am about to perform (e.g., Diana's Ross' "I'm Coming Out" before a coming out story). In this way, the audience gets to hear the men's voices in relation to mine. Following the clip I provide biographical information about the narrator that I am about to perform and where the interview took place. After a brief pause, I then begin to perform the narrative in the voice of the narrator, but without fully embodying him and while referring to the text. To keep the audience from fully suspending disbelief, I do not excise the questions I asked in the original interview and sometimes abruptly drop "character" to ask a question.

The spatio-temporal elements of Reader's Theater in this context help facilitate drawing attention to the multiplicity of selves being performed: the narrator's voice spoken from his own mouth (on the audio clip) in the past, the performer's voice as omniscient narrator in the present, the narrator's voice in the past as represented through the performer in the present, and the performer's voice in the past as represented in the present. Indeed, I found that expanding the bounds of Reader's Theater provided a deeply engaging way to highlight ethical and political questions about oral history performance. Methodologically, it also provided a way for me to document ethnographic material that did not tilt too much in the direction of aestheticizing the political stakes of the narratives or of undermining the complexity of the intersubjective experience shared between researcher, the other, and the audience.

"Pouring Tea" morphed into a fully produced theater production in association with About Face Theater and the Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media, Columbia College, Chicago in 2009. While I was flattered by the invitation and was excited by the possibilities of developing the next incarnation of the work, I was also circumspect about how the transition from a staged reading to a fully produced theater

production would potentially alter the intellectual, ethical, and political intentions of the work. Nonetheless, I worked with five artists—directors, actors, musicians—to workshop the script and to prepare the show for full production. All of the artists agreed on two things: I should get rid of the stool and music stand and that the show should remain a solo production. For them the stool and music stand were too limiting and that my relationship with the men is what made it different from other oral history theater pieces. Regarding this latter point, they also believed that the script needed more of my own story about being black, gay, and from the South.

The play gave me yet another opportunity not only to queer the archive, but also to queer difference. This was particularly true in my performance of Chaz/Chastity. In the version of the play that debuted in April 2010 in Chicago and directed by Daniel Alexander Jones, my stories were included alongside the men's, clustered together in episodic groupings under themes like "Survival of the Fittest" and "Church Sissies." Jones' direction was steeped in the theatrical jazz aesthetic, a non-Western theatrical aesthetic that, according to Omi Osun Joni Jones draws on presence, breath, listening, improvisation, simultaneous truths, collaboration, virtuosity, body-centeredness, and metamorphosis (6 -7).

Born Charles Danner in Newton, NC in 1969, Chaz is an African American pre-operative transgender who presents as a male on Sunday to sing in the church choir and presents as female Monday through Saturday while working at her beauty salon as a hairdresser. [Image 2 of "Chaz"] On occasion, "Chastity," [Image 3 of Chastity] Chaz's alter ego female impersonation character performs at a local gay bar. Because of these multiple forms of gender self-presentation, Chaz's narrative offers an opportunity to reconsider traditional transgender narratives that suggest that having reconstructive surgery makes one whole. Instead, she/he is content retaining male genitalia, living sometimes as male and sometimes as female, but not fully committing to either gender. I highlight how performance helps to frame this middle ground by analyzing my own portrayal of Chaz in my theater piece, SWEET TEA.

Here, in his own words, Chaz names his sexuality.

This is more than just an innocent malapropism, but rather a willful redeployment of "difference" as "indifference"—indeed, the equation of sexual orientation with "disinterest." Chaz's characterization of sexual difference as sexual *indifference* is key to how he/she divests transgenderism of its normativizing power. I do not mean to suggest here that Chaz's transgenderism is inauthentic, for he claims and embraces a transgender identity; yet, her performance of transgender transcends the transnormative narrative of trans identity in two significant ways. First, she is not interested in passing and second, she does not feel incomplete because she is pre-operative.

Daniel Alexander Jones' direction for Chaz's character in the show was meant to highlight Chaz's "indifference," meaning her absolute commitment to presenting as woman while simultaneously realizing that no matter how fierce she was, her biological body would be read as male.

In just the one gesture of putting on spectacular earrings, my embodiment of Chaz highlights gender incoherence and in turn positions the audience in the theater as one and the same as the people who see Chaz in the various places she goes. As with the people who see Chaz who aren't "quite sure what they are seeing" the audience in the theater aren't quite sure what they are seeing either, except both audiences are witnessing Chaz's indifference, her performance of incoherent gender. But how does one archive gender incoherence through performance?

In this excerpt from the play, Jones directs me as Chaz, Charles, and Chastity, to highlight through performance, all of these complicated negotiations of self-presentation.

Here, we see in performance how Charles shifts to Chastity as mediated by Chaz (who is represented through my body as the performer). More importantly, however, is how Chaz theorizes in Butlerian fashion the distinction between gender and sex. She questions if a vagina and long hair constitute being a woman or if a penis and facial hair constitute masculinity and declares that the answers to those questions reside within that space where biology and discourse reside in dialogic tension.

Jones' direction of me points out what Eve Sedgwick theorizes as "threshold effects," those "places where quantitative increments along one dimension can suddenly appear as qualitative differences somewhere else on the map entirely" (16), by having me perform as "Charles," who is suggested through stereotypical "masculine" posture and voice, but while still wearing the earrings and then shift to Chaz/Chastity through gestures learned from working with a skeleton, used in science classes. Here is a clip from that rehearsal of working with the skeleton.

That "nakedness" and "deep work" that Jones references and for which the skeleton is a metaphor, corroborates Chaz's conviction that the core of who we are—our bare bones—is also something that is ever evolving, as well as the body as queer archive. Through my body I conjure these men's memory of self; and my self-embodiment as E. Patrick the researcher and E. Patrick the character, "constitutes subjectivity in the interplay of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency" (4). This interplay of memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency are made manifest through performance, the site at which the practice of everyday life is framed and named as extraordinary in a moment of cultural and self-reflexivity—indeed, that place where the skeletal remains of queer memory reside.